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Highway deaths drop to lowest level since 1950s

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WASHINGTON (AP) - The roads today are full of hazards: Runaway Toyotas, teen drivers texting, commuters using the rearview mirror to check their hair while juggling cups of scalding coffee. Nonetheless, the number of people dying on the highway is the lowest since the 1950s.

The Transportation Department said Thursday that its projections show total traffic deaths declined nearly 9 percent in 2009 _ to 33,963. That's the lowest toll since 1954. In 2008, an estimated 37,261 people died on the roadways.

The newest numbers fit into a trend of steady decreases since 2005, when an estimated 43,510 people were killed.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says there are still too many deaths but credits the decline to more people wearing seat belts, programs to discourage drunken driving, and cars built with better safety features.

Side air bags that protect the head and midsection are becoming standard equipment on many new vehicles. And electronic stability control, which helps motorists avoid rollover crashes, is more common on new cars and trucks.

"We knew that those technologies would be reducing fatalities," said Anne McCartt, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's senior vice president for research. "Vehicles are built to protect people better in crashes now."

She also agreed that an increase in seat belt use could be a factor.

Seat belt use climbed to 84 percent in 2009, partly because of state efforts that let police stop a vehicle for a seat belt violation, even if this is the only violation an officer observes. States have also pushed tougher laws to reduce drunken driving.

In spite of the progress, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood cautioned that "there are still far too many people dying in traffic accidents. Drivers need to keep their hands on the steering wheel and their focus on the road in order to stay safe."

The federal government has sought to crack down on distracted driving, urging states to adopt stringent laws against sending text messages from behind the wheel, as well as other distractions.

According to the Transportation Department's [distraction.gov](#) Web site, using a cell phone has the same impact on a driver's reaction times as a blood alcohol concentration of .08 percent.

Part of the decrease in fatalities is credited to the economic downturn, which has fewer people out on the road. This theory is in line with similar patterns from the early 1980s and early 1990s, when difficult economic conditions led many drivers to cut back on discretionary travel, and traffic deaths decreased.

The number of miles traveled by American drivers in 2009 grew by 6.6 billion, or 0.2 percent, according to preliminary data from the Federal Highway Administration. But this follows a dip in vehicle miles traveled in 2008 and 2007, when the economy was tanking.

Still, safety officials say the rate of deaths per 100 million miles traveled also dropped to a record low. It

fell to 1.16 in 2009, compared with the previous record low of 1.25 the year before.

McCartt said that even though overall miles traveled seems to be coming back up, some categories of driving could carry more risk than others. For example, she speculated people could be doing essential driving to and from work, but cutting back on other types of trips, which could come with more distractions.

"My hope is that when the economy is healthy again, we won't see a return to the kinds of rates we had before," she said.

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On the Net:

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's report on traffic fatalities:

<http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811291.PDF>

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